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ABSTRACT

A large segment of poor readers in elementary school do not supply prosodic features to print; in other words, they do not use pauses, changes in pitch, or differences in emphasis to show their comprehension. Two methods that help children to supply reading intonation involve using phrasally segmented texts and teacher modeling of the correct intonation. In the first of two experiments with fifth grade students, children were asked to divide a story into phrasal units under three conditions: while listening to a normally intoned tape recording of a story, while listening to a highly intoned rendition, and while reading the text without any audio aids. Results showed that the more audio help the children were given, the more they were able to parse the lines correctly. In the second experiment, two groups of low ability fifth grade readers were given training in reading phrasally segmented texts. One of the groups was also exposed to teacher modeling of text. Tape recordings of student reading before and after training revealed increased sensitivity to phrasing, especially among students who had had teacher modeling. (Practice sentences for marking pauses and an example of phrasally segmented text are appended.) (MM)

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READING COMPREHENSION: INSTRUCTIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF SWRL RESEARCH

James H. Coots

The following is an edited transcription of a staff-development session held February 2, 1982, for a group of elementary school teachers in the Long Beach Unified School District.

Dr. Coots:

Today we are going to talk about reading comprehension. And we are going to explore the relationship between comprehension in reading and what the child brings to the learning situation in reading by way of speech skills. Much of this may be "old hat": You learned about it in the university, you've explored it in your teaching, and so forth. But we think we have some ideas that can help you take advantage of what the child brings to the reading situation.

The children we have been working with primarily have been at the fifth- and sixth-grade levels, but we think we also have a lot to say to primary teachers. So bear with me if some of the mechanisms that I suggest seem to be geared toward older children; I think the ideas are applicable to children of all ages in the elementary school.

I want to start off by getting something firmly in place--and that is, we want to legitimize the whole idea of "reading with expression." How many people have asked a kid to read with expression? "Read it over again. This time, read it with expression." We've all done that. I am going to ask you some questions about it. I want to stimulate some thought about this idea of reading with expression.

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What does it mean when you ask a child to read something with expression? What are you trying to get from the child? What are you after: emotions, feelings, meaning? How do you know when a child has read something with expression that the child has read it to satisfy whatever criterion you use? How do you know that it has been read "with expression"?

If a child reads something one time and it is "without expression," and then the child reads it "with expression," what does that signify to you? Is there a change in the way the child processes the text from one reading to the next? There's something about the reading that is different. We can make that observation and infer that the reader is thinking about meaning. And that's the important point here; that's what we're after. We're interested in devising ways to help teach children to become better comprehenders--to think about meaning while they read.

A lot of reading researchers like us have recently begun to focus on things that aren't very well documented just yet. We have been working on ideas that teachers can use in the classroom to improve reading comprehension. We hope you all feel that when a child reads with expression there's some comprehension going on. There's an improvement, something fundamental happening inside the child's brain. It says to you, "That second reading was better than the first because the kid is comprehending a little better." That's important.

In this section of my presentation, I am going to talk about the relationship between speaking and reading. Both of these skills involve

language, so they have a lot in common; but there are some very important differences. The one difference that we all recognize--at least through the primary reading programs, and with some students well up into the upper elementary program--is the coding difference. Oral language has an oral code; reading has a print code. The goal in most primary reading instruction is to give children the skills to decode from print to sound. We don't say that an advanced reader necessarily does all that decoding, because after a while we get to the point where we can look at the visual code and go straight from that into meaning. But while the child is learning to read, the crutch, the help, the assistance that the kid brings into the classroom is that tradition of oral language. So we try to teach the decoding skills, the word identification skills, so that the child can put printed language into a very familiar oral code. That's really important, but we're not going to talk about that today.

There's another important difference between speaking/listening and reading--between oral language and written language. That difference is intonation, or prosody. By prosody I mean three different aspects of speech: (1) pause or duration--the amount of time that we dwell on certain syllables or the amount of time we take between groups of words; (2) changes in pitch; we go up in pitch and we go back down, and those changes have really important ramifications for meaning; (3) differences in emphasis.

Now have you ever asked yourself why it is that we do all that? We do it naturally; we do it whenever we speak. If you were to speak to me

right now without prosodic features, not only would I think you were a little strange, but your speech would also violate my expectations so that it would be more difficult for me to comprehend what you were saying. Have you listened to the synthetic speech on the Radio Shack computer? You can understand it, but you have to work a little harder to understand it because you are expecting the language that you hear to come to you in chunks of information bounded by prosodic features. Instead it just comes one word after another or one syllable after another, however they program it. It violates your expectations.

The point I want to make about prosodic features in oral language is that those features are important for packaging information. When we produce prosodic features in our speaking, we do it automatically. We don't have to think about it, yet it is intimately tied to the message we want to convey to a listener. If you could say the same sentence today in this room, then tomorrow in a classroom to children, and maybe a week from now in another setting, you'd be surprised at how differently you might intone that sentence in order to address your audience more specifically or with a certain emphasis. You are receptive to changes in audience, changes in setting, changes in time, changes in intention--all of that gets packaged into the way that you intone your language.

Now I want to hand out a story we have been working with. I am going to talk about where the intonation is in print. Unfortunately, we don't have a very good set of conventions for showing readers how to intone print. The writer of a piece of text has a very good

understanding of what he or she intends to say. You can stop and monitor yourself sometime when you are writing. You tend to write in spurts and stops; if you say it to yourself mentally without actually mouthing the words, you will tend to say your writing in prosodic elements while you're composing it. That is, there will be envelopes of words all of which go under one contour of intonation, and you package what you say even when you write.

Suppose you leave what you write on the table and somebody comes in and picks it up. Where is all of that intonation that you put into your writing? It is not there any more. It doesn't exist in print. Even a convention like the use of a comma is not a reliable indicator of the author's intonation. If I ask what we use in writing to signal intonation, pitch, and pausing, the comma is the usual answer. It works sometimes. But, for example, look at the first sentence in this handout [see second page of Attachment A]: "Many, many years ago." That comma between "many" and "many" doesn't mean a darn thing. There are so many exceptions to whatever rules you might impose on text for transferring prosodic information that the rules don't stand up very well at all. The job is very difficult for a kid learning to read.

Now suppose that a child reads in a monotone fashion; in other words we are talking about a word caller--"Many . . . many . . . years . . . ago." Or suppose that a child reads in rather funny segments, which we call fragmented ones, and I'll try to render the first sentence in a fragmented reading, like this--"Many many years ago in the far . . . corner of a very poor . . . country stood the poorest of poor

castles." The author didn't mean to say that. No way. But how is the kid going to know that the author didn't mean to say that? Well, we acquire that skill, most of us do. In fact, all of us here probably acquired it just sort of normally as a maturational thing. We were probably all decent students in school, and as a result of just becoming more and more familiar with our language and becoming better and better decoders, we learned to package print--to supply prosodic features to print.

But some children don't learn to do that very well, and we would say that those children comprise a large segment of the poor readers that we tend to see in the upper elementary grades. The classical characterization of those children has been that they tend to be word callers. We have not found that to be true, and you, as teachers, probably would not agree with that characterization. We found that the most difficult problem that children have in packaging text when they read aloud is not that they go word by word, but more that they fragment text by trying to read everything in one breath. They don't pay any attention to commas and periods; they go right on through. I'm sure you see children like that in your classrooms. Those are the kids that have problems intoning text or rendering it prosodically.

One of the cues that a child may use in trying to figure out this whole system "that adults can do but I somehow can't because I'm not a good reader yet" is to read text line by line. They develop an appreciation that text should be read in units larger than single words, but they don't know yet exactly what those larger units are. So we've seen some children in our studies who use the end of the line, which as

we all know is an arbitrary break in the text, as the place to pause. So it is: "Many many years ago in the far corner of a very poor (breath) . . . country stood the poorest of poor castles (breath)."

This section of my presentation is concerned with methods for helping children to supply intonation to reading. I am going to talk about two different methods. One method involves changing the text, so we pre-organize the text for the child. The second method involves modeling the correct intonation so that the kids have a good idea of where they are going. At this point I want to pass out another example of a text; it is the "Androcles and the Lion" story. We've broken it out into phrasal units that are displayed one on top of the other so that each line of text conforms to an information unit or an intonation unit. Each line of text shows the information that goes together, and it shows the number of words that are included under one prosodic envelope--typically one intonation rise and fall with a pause at the end.

Now the first line is a little awkward. But we had kids coming in and reading like this [Read in run-on fashion]: "Androcles a runaway slave had escaped to a forest for safety he had not been there long when," and so forth. It really takes a lot with a fifth-grade reader who has developed this habit over many years of schooling, to slow the kid down and say all right, we are going to read it like this: "Androcles, (pause) a runaway slave, (pause) had escaped to a forest," and so forth. It takes a lot of work to get kids to do this, because these kids just want to read it all in one breath without pausing. They

want to show you what great word callers they are, and that is exactly what they are--they're great word callers. They really do it well; they have been practicing for a long time.

Supposing you wanted to create texts that were blocked out like the Androcles text, one phrase on top of another. How would you go about doing it? We are going to give you another text as we presented it to fifth-grade children. [See Attachment A.] Each sentence is written on a separate line, all the way across the page, horizontally. We asked the children to put a slash mark in the sentence where it was okay to take a breath--where it was okay to pause. I did a little bit of instruction in the classroom beforehand, which is on the first page.

You will notice first of all that the sentences have numbers in front of them. The numbers are there to help you do the task. You are getting all the help the fifth graders got. The number to the left of the sentence indicates the number of slash marks (pause marks) that we feel could be inserted comfortably into that sentence; an asterisk means no break in that sentence. Go ahead and try to put the slash marks in the first five sentences of "The Muffin Muncher." When you do this, it is best either to say the sentence out loud or to say it under your breath so that you go through it one time, and then go back and put the slash marks in.

[The teachers worked for about five minutes marking the locations of acceptable pauses in the first five sentences of "The Muffin Muncher."]

Now I'll pass around the completed version of "The Muffin Muncher" in phrasally segmented text, and you can see how we did it. [See Attachment B.] By the way, we sat around a table like this for days, not on this one text but on a whole bunch of texts, about 20 or 30 of them, and we had the same kinds of discussions I heard you having. There's a lot of difference in the way people choose to segment text. All I want to show you now by these two versions of "The Muffin Muncher" is that creating a phrasally segmented text really doesn't take all that much effort. But the way to go about it, we found, is to work one sentence at a time. Take a sentence and read it--it's best to read it out loud. Then think about where you paused. (And you have to really pause; you just can't read it rapidly. You have to read it with a lot of inflection.) After you have listened to yourself read the sentence, go ahead and put the slashes in where you think the pauses go. Then have it typed out in the format we have used here. That's all we did to create our texts.

Now the second mechanism--modeling--is really important because you can use modeling with or without the phrasally segmented text. You don't need to have this kind of text format in order to model good prosodic rendition in a story. You can do that without this kind of a text. In fact, in a study reported at the American Anthropological Society meeting a couple of years ago, somebody studied teachers who were reputed to be really good storytellers and oral readers and teachers who did not have that reputation--teachers who were "average" readers. A very clea difference was discovered. The length of pauses

that the good readers put in, the difference between the low and high tones in terms of inflection up and down, and the use of emphasis were all greater than what the "average" readers used. Also, the good readers stopped at various critical points in the story and just tossed out questions: "What do you think that means? Did you ever think about anything like this before?" Those mechanisms are really effective, and they are especially effective with poor comprehenders, because these are the kids that are having problems dividing a text into the units of information that go together. So you can use oral modeling in the classroom without phrasally segmented text or you can combine modeling with a phrasally segmented text; such a combination is even more powerful.

If I were going to say anything special to the primary teachers here, I would say to do a lot of reading out loud with your kids. Give them the best oral model you can give them for rendering a text orally. Read a paragraph or even just a sentence, and then have the whole class read it. Don't be afraid to go slowly, because it takes time for kids to appreciate what you're doing. Kids aren't used to speaking in what we call a highly intoned fashion--when a text is rendered with a lot of prosodic features. Kids don't speak with highly intoned features, but they could. And they won't bring it to reading unless you force them to do it. So as a primary teacher, if you could read something like "The Muffin Muncher": "Many, many, years ago . . . in the far corner . . . of a very poor country . . .," and have the kids read it just like you did; that gives them a lot of help in thinking about what it might mean later when you ask them to read something "with expression."

I think children frequently don't understand what it means when the teacher says to read with expression. Well, if you provide good models, you can say, "Remember how we read 'The Muffin Muncher' the other day? Remember how we all read it out loud, and we stopped, and we let our voices go way up and way down to show everybody how we felt about the story and the meaning it had? That's what I want you to do when you read with expression."

I want to conclude by telling you about two different studies we did. The first study investigated the ability of fifth-grade children to take sentences that were written out on one or two lines and divide them where it is okay to pause, that is, divide them into phrasal units. We were curious about the effects of three different accompanying audio conditions. In one condition, the children listened to a tape recording of "The Muffin Muncher," sentence by sentence, and the rendition was a normally intoned rendition. In another condition, the children also heard a tape recording, but this time there were a lot more prosodic features. It was a good oral rendering, a highly intoned rendition of the story. In the third condition, there was no audio at all and the kids just had to do the parsing task flat out like you were doing, with no accompanying support. We found--not to anybody's surprise, but it needed to be documented--that the more audio help you give the children, the better they are at finding the places where it is okay to pause in the sentence. There were 90 pausal junctures in this task, and with a highly intoned audio model we had good readers performing at 96% to 100% accuracy and poor readers were performing at 92% to 96% accuracy with a couple of them getting it all correct.

Q:

Did they listen to the story once and after hearing it done properly, then try to remember what they had heard and go back and do it in that style?

Dr. Coots:

The children had listened to the story two days before we did this task. They listened to it and answered questions.

Q:

The story was done in the proper model?

Dr. Coots:

The story was done in the same model they were to receive in the parsing task two days later--the proper model for them, whatever classroom they were in. There were three different classrooms. They all had a comprehension task where they got the appropriate model. Two days later we went back in and gave them the model again (or no model, whatever the case happened to be), but this time the model read only one sentence at a time. So the children heard the model say, "Many, many years ago . . . in the far corner . . . of a very poor country . . . stood the poorest of poor castles." Then the children parsed that sentence. And when everybody was ready, we went on to the next one and we heard the model again. So there was a lot of hand-holding here; we don't deny that. But the important thing to note is that the very poorest readers in these fifth-grade classes performed better when they had the good oral model than the best readers had performed without any model. On the average, the best readers were around 88% with no model,

while the poorest readers identified only about 75% of the pausal junctures. When we gave the children the audio accompaniment, the poor readers pulled up to almost 88% in the normal audio condition, and then averaged 92% with the highly intoned version. Thus, in this last condition, they surpassed the good readers with no model in the ability to do this task.

Q:

When you read one sentence at a time, aren't you just testing their ability to hear the pause and know what word comes before that?

Dr. Coots:

Yes, you are, but it is an important thing to know about if you are going to spend the effort to take this into instruction in the classroom. For example, suppose you are working with poor readers and you want to begin to give them some strategies, some skills, some knowledge as to what you mean when you ask them to read with expression. Well, the strategy that I would employ as a teacher is to read one sentence at a time providing a highly intoned audio model and to ask the children to read it back to me. They should always be required to look at the page and read it back, because we want them to get the connection between the prosodic rendition and the printed text. So I think our finding is important because it shows what a powerful effect an audio model has on a child's ability to break the text into units of words that go together.

Q:

Wouldn't you need further research then to see whether the more they have audio models for the same text that they are hearing, the more

they can apply it to the new things that are coming in that they are not going to hear? They are not going to hear it all the time, but you're saying you could use it as practice to get used to doing that so eventually they apply it on their own.

Dr. Coots:

Your question brings up the second study we did. The children had one week's training on other texts, not on "The Muffin Muncher," and then they came back and read "The Muffin Muncher" again, but they read only the first five paragraphs each time. The children received two different types of training for 45 minutes a day in small groups. Sixteen of the very poorest readers, the bottom of the whole fifth grade, were randomly assigned to the two training groups. The groups practiced reading stories that were broken out into phrasally segmented text.

With the first group I simply told them that they all had the problem of reading right through all the traffic signals in stories. They didn't pay any attention to the commas and the periods and everything else. (We knew this to be true from previous assessments.) And I told them it was important to divide stories into groups of words that go together. Then I asked them to read the various selections to themselves and also to read aloud for me so I could check their progress. Each day different children volunteered to read a paragraph aloud. With the kids that were having real problems, I asked them to do things like run their fingers under the line until they got to the end, and hold their fingers there while they took a pause. We got these

children so that they were all able to read the phrasally segmented texts line by line with generous pauses between lines.

Now the other group got exactly the same treatment plus something else. I gave them a highly intoned oral modeling of the training texts. So I would read portions of the text, and then have the children read it back to me. Then I had them go on to read different sections on their own with good expression.

Q:

Wouldn't there be a problem, though, if you were training them to pause at the end of every line, so that when they come to a long sentence in a regular text, they would stop at the end of the line?

Dr. Coots:

We had to point that out to the children--that normal stories aren't written phrase by phrase as these stories were. They have to be careful; they just can't pause at the end of a line wherever they come to it.

Q:

Do you find that's what they started to do when they got to regular sentences?

Dr. Coots:

Yes, we had a couple of kids that apparently were doing that in their classroom reading after the first couple days of training. We got them to stop, but in the study itself, we only used phrasally segemented text. We didn't try to generalize the training to normally formatted text.

So for our study, we had two groups: one had modeling and the other didn't. They both had phrasal segmentation, and they got a week's training. They read "The Muffin Muncher" aloud (tape recorded) both before they began and after they finished the last day of training. We had three linguists and psychologists at SWRL judge these tapes. The tapes were presented in a mixed fashion so they didn't know which one actually was recorded first for each child. Their task was to judge which reading displayed more sensitivity to the phrasal segmentation of the text--which one showed the greater pauses and showed that the child was sensitive to the phrasing we had done in these texts.

The judges' ratings showed that both groups of children improved. In other words, the judges were fairly reliably able to pick which was the reading done after training as opposed to the reading that was done before training. But more than that, the judges were better able to choose the before and after readings with the group that had oral modeling. So the oral modeling added something to the instruction beyond the effect of the phrasal text alone.

I want to conclude this session by playing a couple of tapes of kids who did this task. These tapes show how children can learn to read with expression--and with better comprehension. [Tapes played.]

Name_____

School_____

Teacher_____

Practice Sentences

THE STORY OF THE THREE BEARS

(1) Once upon a time there were three bears.

(2) They lived in a little house in the woods.

* Each bear had a porridge bowl.

(2) One day they made some hot porridge for their breakfast.

(3) "This porridge is too hot," said the Mama Bear, after she had poured it into their bowls.

And so they decided to go for a walk while the porridge was cooling.

While they were away, a little girl called Goldilocks passed by their house.

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(3) Many, many years ago in the far corner of a very poor country stood the poorest of poor castles.

(1) The villagers of the castle did not have riches and valuables.

* They were also poor in spirit.

(1) They had done nothing to be proud of.

(2) The only way they had stayed alive at all was by baking and selling the best muffins in the land.

(3) Every morning the king, who was also the head baker, would bake a fresh batch.

(4) When he had finished, the people would load their carts and set off for the other villages in the kingdom.

(1) There was never any trouble selling the muffins.

* They were the finest ever baked.

(3) But because the people were so poor, they had to use all the money they had earned to buy wood for the fire and flour to make more muffins.

(5) So, day in and day out the head baker, who was also the king, would build up the giant fires in the ovens and bake muffins.

(1) He would slowly mix all the ingredients in a big cracked bowl.

(1) Then he would pour the mix into the tins and put them in the ovens to bake.

* The people were just barely getting along.

(2) As if things were not bad enough, there appeared at the castle one day a great dragon.

(2) Now this was not your everyday run-of-the-mill dragon.

* He was rather large.

* He was a little heavy.

* He was a muffin-munching dragon.

(3) With crumbs still on his face from the last muffins he'd eaten he came down the hill right up to the bridge.

(2) Taking one look, the people ran over the bridge and into the castle.

* The dragon took a great long smell.

(1) He said, "I smell muffins!"

(2) This castle, he decided, smelled like a nice place to stay.

(1) So he moved in right under the bridge.

* He was very tired from his long journey.

(3) He took his pillow and the picture of his pony from his bag, curled up, and fell fast asleep.

(2) The next morning the people looked out their castle windows and thought that the dragon was gone.

(1) Breathing a sigh, they began preparing for another day.

(3) After loading their wagons with fresh warm muffins they set off across the bridge over the soundly sleeping dragon.

(1) With all the noise from the wagons he woke up right away.

(1) He peeked up over the edge of the bridge to see what was going on.

* "So, that's it.

* The people from the castle make muffins!

(1) Those muffins look so good and I am very hungry.

(1) How can I get the people to bring me fresh muffins?"

(1) He thought and thought and finally came up with a plan.

(3) He jumped up on the bridge right in front of the people, tried to look very mean, and roared.

(1) "Stop, or I shall burn up your bridge!"

(1) Then he blew a little flame and puffed three smoke rings.

(4) "From now on," he rumbled, "you shall each give me ten of your best muffins as your price to cross my bridge."

(1) "But this is our bridge!" they cried.

(2) "Well if I burn it up it won't be anybody's bridge," said the dragon.

(3) The people thought and talked awhile and finally agreed to give the dragon what he wanted.

(2) They barely had enough money to buy wood, let alone enough wood to build a new bridge.

(2) From then on every wagon that crossed the bridge left ten muffins.

(2) With crumbs all around him the dragon would sit there stuffing those scrumptious muffins away.

(1) This might have gone on to this day except for one little thing.

(1) The dragon was eating so many muffins that the people did not have enough to sell.

(3) Because of that, they didn't have enough money to buy wood for the ovens or even flour to bake more muffins.

(1) They would return every day with fewer and fewer goods.

(1) One day they all came home with nothing.

(4) The next morning the head baker, who was also the king, could not fire up the great ovens because there was no wood.

(2) He could not use his big cracked bowl because he had no flour or goods to put in it.

(4) With a heavy heart and a tear in his eye the baker sat sadly on a pile of empty flour sacks and cried.

ATTACHMENT B

Materials with Pauses Indicated by Line Breaks

THE MUFFIN MUNCHER

Many, many years ago
in the far corner
of a very poor country
stood the poorest of poor castles.

The villagers of the castle
did not have riches and valuables.
They were also poor in spirit.
They had done nothing
to be proud of.

The only way they had stayed alive at all
was by baking and selling
the best muffins in the land.

Every morning
the king,
who was also the head baker,
would bake a fresh batch.
When he had finished,
the people would load their carts
and set off
for the other villages
in the kingdom.

There was never any trouble
selling the muffins.
They were the finest ever baked.
But because the people were so poor,
they had to use all the money they had earned
to buy wood for the fire
and flour to make more muffins.

So,
day in and day out
the head baker,
who was also the king,
would build up the giant fires in the ovens
and bake muffins.

He would slowly mix all the ingredients
in a big cracked bowl.
Then he would pour the mix into the tins
and put them in the ovens to bake.

The people were just barely getting along.
As if things were not bad enough,
there appeared at the castle one day
a great dragon.
Now this was not
your everyday
run-of-the-mill dragon.
He was rather large.
He was a little heavy.
He was a muffin-munching dragon.

With crumbs still on his face
from the last muffins he'd eaten
he came down the hill
right up to the bridge.

Taking one look,
the people ran over the bridge
and into the castle.

The dragon took a great long smell.
He said, "I smell muffins!"
This castle,
he decided,
smelled like a nice place to stay.
So he moved in
right under the bridge.

He was very tired from his long journey.
He took his pillow
and the picture of his pony from his bag,
curled up,
and fell fast asleep.

The next morning
the people looked out their castle windows
and thought that the dragon was gone.
Breathing a sigh,
they began preparing for another day.

After loading their wagons
with fresh warm muffins
they set off across the bridge
over the soundly sleeping dragon.
With all the noise from the wagons
he woke up right away.

He peeked up over the edge of the bridge
to see what was going on.
"So, that's it.
The people from the castle make muffins!
Those muffins look so good
and I am very hungry.
How can I get the people
to bring me fresh muffins?"

He thought and thought
and finally came up with a plan.
He jumped up on the bridge
right in front of the people,
tried to look very mean,
and roared.

"Stop,
or I shall burn up your bridge!"
Then he blew a little flame
and puffed three smoke rings.

"From now on," he rumbled,
"you shall each give me
ten of your best muffins
as your price to cross my bridge."

"But this is our bridge!" they cried.

"Well if I burn it up
it won't be anybody's bridge," said the dragon.

The people thought
and talked awhile
and finally agreed
to give the dragon what he wanted.
They barely had enough money to buy wood,
let alone enough wood
to build a new bridge.

From then on
every wagon that crossed the bridge
left ten muffins.

With crumbs all around him
the dragon would sit there
stuffing those scrumptious muffins away.

This might have gone on to this day
except for one little thing.
The dragon was eating so many muffins
that the people did not have enough to sell.
Because of that,
they didn't have enough money
to buy wood for the ovens
or even flour to bake more muffins.

They would return every day
with fewer and fewer goods.
One day
they all came home with nothing.

The next morning
the head baker,
who was also the king,
could not fire up the great ovens
because there was no wood.
He could not use his big cracked bowl
because he had no flour or goods
to put in it.

With a heavy heart
and a tear in his eye
the baker sat sadly
on a pile of empty flour sacks
and cried.
"We have no more goods to make muffins.
We have no more wood to light the fires.
We cannot bake any more muffins.

Our bridge will be burned down.
What are we ever to do?"

That same day
the dragon woke up,
brushed his teeth,
combed his hair,
and prepared for another day of muffin munching.

He waited
and waited
and waited.
No wagons came.
His stomach began to rumble and roar.
He tried eating a few of the crumbs
that had dropped on the ground
the day before.
They were stale.
"No muffins!" he roared.

Finally
he decided to enter the castle
and find out what had happened
to all his muffins.

The dragon walked through the castle
until he reached the bakery.
Then he peeked inside
"Where are my muffins?" he roared.
"I've been waiting
and waiting
and waiting!
Where are they?"

The head baker,
who was also the king,
walked up to the dragon
as bravely as he could.
"Mr. Dragon," he said,
"we are poor people.
We live in a poor castle
which has very little.
Before you came,
the muffins we sold
barely paid for our firewood
and the goods we need
to mix muffins.
Now that we have to give you so many muffins,
we can't buy enough wood.
Our ovens have no heat."

That poor dragon
was so very confused.
He wanted some muffins
because he was so hungry.
But at the same time
he felt sorry for the baker
and the other people
who lived in the castle.

He thought
and thought.
Finally,
a great big smile crossed his face.
"I have it!" he shouted.
He asked the head baker,
who was also the king,
to call all the people
to a castle meeting
so that he could tell them
of his wonderful plan.

The people
happily began to cheer and shout
as he finished telling his plan.
Surely
the dragon had solved the castle's problems
and his own.

Then and for always
the dragon heated the ovens of the bakery
with his mighty flame.
With the extra money they saved
by not having to buy wood
the people were able
to leave a stack of muffins
in reach of the muffin-munching dragon
every single day.